Supporting Visible Minority and Indigenous Students in a Postsecondary Education Setting: Addressing their Academic Aspirations, Challenges, and Barriers
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ABSTRACT
Canada ranks high among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in terms of advanced education with 66 percent of Canadians having completed some form of postsecondary education. However, students from low income indigenous and immigrant backgrounds are under-represented at postsecondary levels. The current study used a qualitative approach to examine the experiences, challenges and barriers faced by these learners who were enrolled in a postsecondary human services program in Western Canada. Findings suggest that despite 40 years of a multicultural approach to education these students continue to experience several barriers to continuing their study programs. The need for radicalizing teaching by using alternate critical decolonizing discourses and pedagogy is discussed.

INTRODUCTION
As capital for upward mobility in the modern world, postsecondary education has never been more necessary to secure and achieve employment that provides for a good quality of life and functions as a person’s social location from which to self-actualize as an individual and as a citizen. The Canadian Council on Learning reports that employment prospects are better for graduates with postsecondary education and best for those with a university degree in particular. The advantages of postsecondary education go much beyond gaining employment. Advanced education is associated with positive societal outcomes including higher productivity, social integration, economic growth and stronger communities in terms of reduced crime rates and incarceration.

Although Canada ranks high among OECD countries in terms of advanced education with 66 percent of Canadians aged 25 to 64 having completed some form of postsecondary education youth from low income and indigenous backgrounds are under-represented at postsecondary levels. In a longitudinal examination of school achievement and school-to-work transition among youth (18-20 years old) in Canada, 54% of non-indigenous youth participate in some form of post-secondary education compared to 35% of indigenous youth exposed to training or education beyond high school. Furthermore, there is a higher propensity for indigenous youth compared to non-indigenous youth (14%-9%) to leave post-secondary education [1]. On a more positive note, comparative census data on attainment of post-secondary education among the 25-44 year olds shows higher numbers of indigenous Canadians earning university degrees or college certification in 2006 compared to 2001. At present, income disparities are appearing among indigenous and immigrant groups. In an examination of census data among 25-44 year olds, Gerber found that Metis (50%), Indian and Inuit men (mid 30%) report low percentages of working full-time compared to non-Aboriginal men (60%). Among women, Indian and Inuit women are least likely to work full-time. In comparing across genders, indigenous women have higher levels of educational attainment compared to men but are less likely to work full-time and earn higher incomes. However, Gerber has found that indigenous men and women with university degrees who do find jobs earn more than their visible minority graduates. Increasingly immigrants are joining the ranks of low-income earners. Recent immigrants (those in Canada for less than 10 years), experience slower integration into the Canadian labor market and lower educational attainment. Low-income earners among immigrants reached decade high levels in 2002 and 2003, about 3.5 times higher than the rate among the Canadian-born population. This is despite the fact that 52 percent of low-income earners were skilled economic immigrants, and 41 percent had university degrees. According to recent research enrolment in post-secondary education is increasing particularly
and motivation to pursue postsecondary education \cite{2,4}. Such learning environments can adversely affect their academic expectations among minority students is not encouraged and an overall negative learning environment that contributes to poor performance facing include discriminatory school policies and attitudes of teachers, an organizational structure where achievement or success visible minority students as those from African, Asian, and South American backgrounds. This paper will henceforth refer to students from low-income background experience lack of academic preparedness before the end of high school and lack information about tuition levels, grants or loans\cite{3}.

Studies reveal that indigenous and immigrant/refugee students encounter numerous challenges at the postsecondary level. Examples include lack of information and difficulties navigating information and enrolment systems lack of orientation or guidance on their educational trajectories or in navigating the university system and linguistic challenges. However, Sinacore and Lerner found that students did find support within the university particularly the career services that provided them with career and social support. Still, other supports were requested by students namely assistance with language, cultural adaptation, legal status issues, guidance on basic living in Canada, and social support (e.g. facilitating social networking for students). In another Canadian study indigenous students reported encountering non-indigenous peers who: i) had fixed and stereotyped perceptions of Aboriginals, ii) made continuous inquiries and/or assumptions about their ethnic or racial identity, and/or iii) misjudged how indigenous students had attained their educational funding to attend school. Furthermore, indigenous students reported feeling culturally and socially isolated and that the curriculum either misrepresented or eliminated indigenous Canadians.

While some of the challenges discussed above may also affect students from low income backgrounds, indigenous and ‘visible minority students’ face additional challenges arising from institutional and systemic discriminatory processes. We refer to visible minority students as those from African, Asian, and South American backgrounds. This paper will henceforth refer to students from these backgrounds as minority students. The additional barriers that students from low-income minority backgrounds face include discriminatory school policies and attitudes of teachers, an organizational structure where achievement or success among minority students is not encouraged and an overall negative learning environment that contributes to poor performance and behavioral problems among these students. Such learning environments can adversely affect their academic expectations and motivation to pursue postsecondary education \cite{2,4}.

Despite several barriers and challenges, an increasing number of minority students from low-income backgrounds are enrolling in postsecondary education. This includes a significant number of mature aged (25 years and above) first generation immigrants and indigenous learners. Canadian research that examines the school experiences, circumstances and worldviews of mature aged minority students is scarce. A significant proportion of indigenous Canadians are enrolling in postsecondary study as mature aged students, but there is a need for research on the kinds of supports they need and value to complete their programs of study. Mature aged minority students may differ in a number of ways from their younger peers. Their experiences, perspectives and ways of dealing with the barriers and challenges can be very different from those of their younger counterparts. Many, especially first generation immigrants from minority backgrounds already have post-secondary qualifications and/or work experience acquired in their country of origin. In the case of indigenous students, many have accumulated a vast amount of life experience that can be invaluable in programs of study like human services. Mature aged students often have family responsibilities and many are also single parents. The responsibilities that come with single parenthood and/or familial responsibilities often impact their financial circumstances and study capacity.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to examine the experiences and ongoing challenges faced by visible minority students enrolled in a postsecondary educational program and identify factors that can support their educational goals and aspirations. Students of indigenous descent included those who self-identified as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Postsecondary education refers to educa-
tional programs offered by ‘postsecondary educational institutions’, which include both universities and community colleges. This study was conducted in a postsecondary educational institution in Western Canada and participating students were specifically from the social work and community development program. This postsecondary educational institution was specifically selected because a significant proportion of its students are from low-income, minority and indigenous backgrounds.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Standpoints**

The authors of this study drew from post-colonial and critical race theory (CRT) perspectives in order to examine and assign meaning to the lived experiences and challenges faced by the students. Post-colonial perspectives help in understanding how colonial educations, through the use of English (and other imperial languages) have propagated discourses that reinforce the hegemony of western forms of knowledge and have perpetuated the power and interests of postcolonial elites, rather than of the population as a whole. In this process the discourses relevant and available to the marginalized population are either not heard or are effectively silenced. Critical Race Theory (CRT) derives from post-colonial theories. It challenges the dominant discourses on race and racism by examining how the structures, policies and governance in institutions of higher learning perpetuate racial educational inequalities. In these institutions teaching and learning reflect Eurocentric ways of knowing and interpreting the world. They become vestiges of privilege for white students while minority students are at risk of feeling marginalized, oppressed and silenced. While variables like gender, religion, sexual orientation, social class, educational achievements and resident status may also contribute to racial oppression and shape identity and behavior, this study focuses primarily on oppression and marginality as it relates to race.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by minority students and the meanings they assigned to their experiences. This is in keeping with critical post-modern perspectives that reject master narratives that attempt to encompass all phenomena or dictate the construction of lives and do not believe in examining causal relations between variables and focusing on human explanations of actions or meanings. Research that follows from critical post-colonial perspectives seeks to give voice to the marginalized. Research that draws from CRT in particular, aims to be transformative in that the outcomes must benefit the research participants.

**Researchers, Participants and the Recruitment Process**

The researchers who were involved in this study were from minorities and radicalized backgrounds. They have a strong social justice and anti-discrimination orientation, which was shaped partly by their own personal experiences of racism, sexism, and discrimination. Their perspectives influenced the analysis and interpretation of data. In all, fourteen (N=14) minority students participated in the study. Of these seven self-identified as indigenous/First Nations (N=7) and seven identified as first generation immigrant (n=7). Except for three, all students in the study sample received student financial aid either from the Provincial Government or from aid schemes designed specifically to support indigenous and minority learners. Although the study did not specifically target mature aged students, all participants who consented to participate in the study were mature aged. Their ages ranged from 25 to 52 years. There were 11 female and 3 male students. They were interviewed in depth using a semi structured interview schedule. The majority of the students (10 out of 4) had caregiving responsibilities—they had young children or had caregiving responsibilities for extended family members. Many of the study participants (11 out of 14) worked between 6 to 8 hours to supplement their earnings.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants for the study. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the program coordinators who disseminated information about the study to the students in their classrooms. Study information was also displayed on the school notice boards. Students who expressed interest to participate in the study provided their names and contact details to the program coordinators who in turn provided these to the research investigators. Interviews were conducted by the first author, a research assistant and a Master’s student who was trained in qualitative research interviewing.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was performed through in-depth face-to-face interviews with each interview lasting for a maximum period of 90 minutes. Interviews started with broad open ended questions: “Tell me what a typical day at school is like”; “Tell me why you decided to go to school; “Tell me what are some challenges you face as a student (financial, relationship, fears of losing financial support, taking care of your children, health, learning, harassment, racism, drinking a lot); “What do you think are your strengths? (e.g. you have a lot of persistence, you never give up) and “What supports do you have”? During the course of the interview clarifications were sought from the participants and they were also asked to elaborate on emerging issues salient to the study. Chance of misinformation by the interviewer was minimized by audio taping the interviews and subsequently transcribing them verbatim.

**Analysis**

Data were analyzed using grounded theory inductive methods and thematic analysis. The method of constant comparison for identifying categories, sub categories and themes helped to make meaning of the raw data and to transform it into a coherent
depiction of the students’ experiences. Each transcript was read several times independently by 2 members from the research team in order to obtain an overall understanding about the experiences and challenges faced by the participants. Coding was then performed separately by each member. The participant’s language guided the development of the category or code labels [17-20]. The coders also wrote ongoing self-reflective memos documenting their personal reactions and thoughts on each participant’s narratives about their experiences, challenges and needs. These memos helped in developing specific questions to target during the interviews and these were included in the data analysis. Inter coder agreement was sought by going through the coding process to ensure that there was 80% agreement between the two coders in assigning the same text to a designated category. The same code check process was then repeated for themes and using this strategy the coders were able to achieve a 90% agreement on the themes. An audit trail was maintained for the whole research process. Other measures that were taken to increase the rigor of the results included checking the comments of each participant against those of others, being self-reflexive, debriefing after the interview and including several direct quotes while discussing the results of the study. Pseudo-names have been used to protect student confidentiality [21,22].

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data that emerged highlighted the educational aspirations of these students, their ongoing practical and emotional struggles, the sacrifices they were making and their determination to succeed despite challenges. While several themes emerged from the analysis of the data, this article focuses on three themes: racism as an ongoing experience, culture of teaching and learning and an oppressive financial assistance scheme.

Racism as an Ongoing Experience

Many students shared that they had chosen this college for pursuing postsecondary study because of its large multicultural and indigenous student community. They expected less discrimination based on factors like race, skin color, class and accent in this learning environment and this was important to them. The students’ experiences suggest that issues of race and racism are not muted even in colleges that have a high proportion of minority students. Students shared their experiences of racism and discrimination from a minority of their white teachers and peers and their general feelings towards approaching authority figures like administrators and counselors.

Margaret, an indigenous student described one of her white instructors as:

She seems to be promoting inequality through: not penalizing plagiarism, playing favorites, accepting and perpetuating racist attitudes and behaviors from students and creating a hierarchical classroom structure.

This student also remarked that social conflicts in the classroom (involving instructors and students) were continually left unresolved by some instructors. Students appeared to be ‘shut down’ when they tried to address these issues. The student said that this silencing had the effect of indigenous students interpreting this as a prejudicial action used to avoid confronting racism. This apparent lack of understanding from a minority of instructors left Margaret and some of her peers feeling ‘powerless, unable to resolve social conflicts, discouraged social cohesiveness and created a negative classroom atmosphere’.

Another student shared that that poor teacher role modeling by at least one instructor was incongruent with the values of equality and social justice promoted and taught in their studies. On another level indigenous students highlighted their experiences of subtle racism from non-indigenous particularly white students. Julie recalled her experiences of how racism manifested itself in other ways for example:

Excluding, you in a conversation, condescending stares and the ‘cliquey problem’ with distinct racial groups sticking together. Sarah, another indigenous student who had a learning disability had experienced ongoing race based harassment and bullying from a group of ‘white students’. When she related her experience to an instructor she was told that she would have to tackle this on her own. Indigenous students also reported experiencing, what they claimed as ‘colonialist attitudes’ and behaviors from a small group of students including an instructor. As expressed by Margaret:

White women refuse to acknowledge there is a history and they don’t even want to talk about this history.

She also perceived that there was a lack of attention by the school’s leadership to address these attitudes and this led to perpetuation of these behaviors and practices by people who harbored these attitudes.

The experiences of these students support Margaret Russell’s statement that ‘race and racism are endemic, permanent’, and ‘a central rather than marginal factor in defining and explaining individual experiences’ [18]. They highlight that racism and privilege are often entrenched in the psyche of society and its members and are manifested either consciously or unconsciously in their behaviors. In the above instance the students’ experiences of being excluded in conversations, condescendingly stared at, and her community’s history not being acknowledged (or pretending as if it never happened) can be explained as manifestations of covert colonial ‘micro aggression’ by the privileged group towards those who are marginalized. These are often covert ways of reminding the marginalized of their place in the racial hierarchy.

Micro aggression is rooted in unequal social, cultural, economic and political conditions and from those structural factors...
that are often invisible to people. Racial micro-aggression may entail a number of behavioral (e.g. daily verbal), unconscious worldviews (e.g. racial and religious supremacy), social structural (e.g. gender, ethnic, or racial) and political institutional policies and practices (e.g. colonial policies and practices), which can promote devastating consequences for the marginalized, minority groups, or for the underprivileged. Micro aggressions can contribute to maintaining structural inequalities between different groups of people in society. Micro aggression can be used both as means of naturalization of structural power and social control through which the marginalized groups (e.g. racial groups, aboriginal) are discriminated, exploited, and oppressed and prevented from enjoying freedom and establishing social justice. In brief, processes and practices of blaming the victims for the status quo and internalizing various injustices in daily life as normal by the victims can perpetuate and neutralize oppressive power.

Margaret’s experience of being ‘shut down’ by the white instructor when racially charged issues came up in the classroom conveys the instructor’s attitudes of apathy or feelings of discomfort when dealing with issues like racism and oppression [23-26]. Such behavior, while conveying the instructor’s privileged social location has the effect of negating students’ experiences as racial beings. It can also silence other minority groups who may feel that bringing up such issues, which are central to their identity and self-concept, in class is risky and may create problems such as retribution from faculty and their white peers. Julie’s experience of being told by her instructor that she would have to tackle the bullying on her own can be explained as a conspiracy of silence. As explained by Daniel, this is another form of micro aggression that is often manifested by instructors, either to avoid racially charged situations in racially integrated interactions or to avoid conflicts with students, especially when they know that they will have little support from the management. When instructors do not actively challenge racism, they are giving the impression that they are condoning it [27-30]. They are also projecting an attitude of color blindness which is also a form of micro aggression “because it denies the racial and experiential reality of people of color and provides an excuse for white people to claim they are not prejudiced”.

The ‘cliquey problem’ with students sticking together in distinct racial groups, is a very common occurrence that can be observed in institutions of higher learning in countries like Canada. These are strategies that students who feel marginalized often use to gain acceptance, visibility and refuge from the hegemony of the dominant group. Classroom environments that do not allow students to discuss their experiences of race and related issues can produce and reproduce social inequality, perpetuate a ‘politics of difference’, racial hegemony and race stereotyping. Such environments are disadvantageous to all students. Minority students who are sensitive to these issues may feel oppressed and disempowered and have to live with stereotyping threats [31-34]. They can experience negative emotions such as lack of motivation and pride in their achievements and disengagement from study, which can act as a disincentive to completing their programs of study. White students, on the other hand will remain immersed in their privileged social groups, oblivious to ways in which their attitudes and behaviors impact on marginalized groups and maintain the structures and systems of oppression.

There were significant differences between indigenous and immigrant students in how they experienced racism and coped with it. It was noted that immigrant students, unlike their indigenous peers were not as vocal in articulating their experiences of racism and colonialism. Although they did highlight the issue of ‘distinct racial student groups sticking together’ they accepted this as inevitable. They also did not comment on racist attitudes and behaviors of their instructors or white peers. But this did not mean that they had not experienced racism or that the classroom interactions between white students, teachers and indigenous students were lost on them. They appeared to ignore it, chose not to discuss it and remain silent. The interviews provided evidence why immigrant first generation students reacted differently to their experiences of racism.

Differences in the experience of racism between groups, in this case indigenous and immigrant students and individual reactions to it are shaped by several intersecting factors like history, circumstances of migration and socio-economic and cultural factors. Indigenous students hail from families that have been subjected to centuries of injustice from the colonists in the form of genocide, destruction of their native languages and culture, forced removal of children from families and their placement in residential schools. The emotional, physical and sexual violence and the destruction of cultural identity experienced by many of their parents and grandparents in these residential schools have fostered a deep mistrust between indigenous people and the Canadian education system. This historical and political legacy makes indigenous students highly conscious of and sensitive to issues of oppression, rights, racism and white privilege, which were being refueled and reinforced in the classroom [27,28].

Minority migrant students on the other hand, especially first generation had migrated to Canada in search of a better livelihood. They had also experienced racism as evidenced from their expressed reluctance to approach authority figures like counselors, school administrators or to question the teaching staff. However, unlike their indigenous counterparts, they lacked a public discourse of sufficient general mainstream acceptance to fuel courage to complain or even ask questions. Or as stated by Dei they do not have a dominant body to raise consciousness about their experiences. As a result, these students often remained silent [35-38]. While some students did not want to feel interiorized by people in authority others internalized that the problems they were experiencing were due to their own inadequacies. This was evident from the following narrative of Elizabeth:

I have not spoken to anybody, but we students talk amongst ourselves and they say – that’s their school system and that’s how it is. So I am an immigrant - I don’t want to restructure their school system – but if you speak to anybody and they say that’s how this school system is - you feel like maybe it’s going to look like I’m from a different learning standard, I cannot cope with the learning
standard here or maybe it’s me, I wasn’t educated in this country so maybe it’s me who is having this problem.

The powerlessness and lack of voice that migrant students experienced when faced with discrimination and other problems is expressed in the following statement: ‘I always tell my son we are citizens but the rules are different for us because we are immigrants, we can be deported any time if we create trouble’. This student—like many others—did not want to be seen as a ‘trouble maker’ by asking questions that would make her white student peers, teachers or administrators feel uncomfortable. It seems that they were aware of the stereotype image that minority people are a problem for the rest of society because of their inability to conform to white middle class models of life. As explained by Chantier, minorities come to accept that it is their responsibility that they happen to be subjugated and also tend to default to the pragmatic wisdom of treating “the system” as the standard-setter for them in Canadian society.

Many minority students, especially those coming from previous English-speaking colonies continue to view the white colonial North as possessing infinitely superior ideology, knowledge, and education systems. Often students coming from these countries, especially the first generation, tend to accept the Canadian education system uncritically and fail to see its inherent flaws, for example the structural inequalities that reinforce racism and white privilege and promote superiority of Eurocentric values and culture.

Finally, some immigrant students may choose to suffer silently and not complain about racism because of the benevolent paternalism shown by their white hosts. Benevolent paternalism is often an effective strategy used by oppressors to silence, discipline and manipulate minorities into accepting the oppression of racism. The following narrative from an immigrant student who had entered Canada as a refugee captures the concept:

I feel sometimes I’m not even supposed to complain because I don’t deserve this. This is like—they (the whites) are doing me a favor, they don’t have to do that for me. Sometimes you get that mentality because of where you come from, so you don’t even see the biases or anything in that system.

In summary, the results highlight that racism was an ongoing feature in the lives of many of these students. Only the experience of it and the ways of dealing with it were different. Clearly, this was having a negative impact on students—as they were feeling silenced, powerless and inadequate, blaming themselves for difficulties, and living with stereotype threat. This ongoing racial battle fatigue can affect their academic aspirations.

The Culture of Teaching and Learning

This section deals specifically with the students’ experiences of their study program. All students shared that the program as a whole lacked the flexibility to accommodate their life circumstances. While this may be a common complaint of students in all teaching institutions, these students in particular were mature aged and had multiple roles, which added to the stress of being a student. They were breadwinners for their immediate family; sole parents of young children and caregivers for extended family members and some even had financial responsibilities for their families living overseas. In order to meet their living expenses many were forced to work full shifts while others worked in more than one job. The lack of an extended family support system and affordable childcare services meant that a lot of their time went into meeting the needs of their family. Besides, the majority of the students received provincial financial aid that required them to take five courses each term and pass in all of them in order to maintain eligibility for the funding. The stress experienced by the students was articulated very well by one student who made her white student peers, teachers or administrators feel uncomfortable.

Reading texts and writing essays also suggest that teaching and assessment practices were very much modeled on western ways of learning. One student stated that ‘teachers should incorporate indigenous ways of knowing/learning such as sharing circles’ as this would contextualize teaching to their lived experiences and make it culturally more relevant. The student also stressed that this could “help to break down the mistrust and the interaction problems between students and teachers and the cliquey problem they have there”. A student who had experienced racist interactions between some teachers and students in the classroom shared: ‘classroom social norms and the teaching practices of some teachers are not reflective of social work values of equality, empowerment and respect for diversity’.

These findings are in keeping with previous research that current social work education despite its multicultural focus may be failing to meet the needs of minority students, both in terms of content and the pedagogy used for the professionalization process. The students’ experiences of their study program and ongoing racism present a challenge to social work’s current liberal multicultural approach to teaching and practice. While this approach has enhanced the cultural awareness of predominantly
white students to the needs of minorities, it has failed to address the issues of racism and the impact that power and privilege inequalities can have on the learning needs of minority students. Furthermore, studies show that the didactic model of teaching delivery and assessment, where students read texts, attend lectures and focus on exams, written assignments and final grades is ineffective in preparing even white students for professional practice. This strengthens the argument for a critical examination of social work’s multicultural approach to teaching. This is discussed further in the final section of this paper.

**An Oppressive Financial Assistance Scheme**

The majority of students in the program (11 out of 14) were receiving financial assistance. A major challenge faced by students was maintaining their eligibility to the 2-year assistance scheme, while balancing the demands arising from their multiple roles. The stress experienced by students on financial assistance is well captured in the following narrative. This student had received A grades in most of his courses but was forced to drop out of the program just 3 weeks before completion of the first year. The student worked a five-hour night shift, (from 9 pm to 2 am) and spent 2 hours commuting to and from his workplace.

If the intent of the assistance is to help people like me not become a burden on the system but to become a productive member they were going to give me something that will sustain me to go through the program. At the end of the day after the tuition fee, I was left with $840 to pay for my rent, transport, and lodge. Most students they were breaking down.

Students felt powerless to ask questions for fear that they may lose their assistance or may be looked upon as lacking the ability to learn or made to feel as one student said, “we are doing a service by giving you the assistance”. Students were also unclear about the details of the financial assistance scheme, except for information that their assistance would be cut if they failed a course. One student who had reached a financial crisis during the course of the program said that he found out through his own online research that he was eligible for cash credits as part of the assistance scheme. He reported:

“I had to dig in, even though the system is there, you have to know the vocabulary to use because it is controlled to a point where they don’t tell you until you ask”.

Students shared that the stress involved in meeting the demands of the financial assistance scheme had resulted in almost half their class dropping out of the study program while those who remained (the study participants) were hanging in by their teeth despite the heavy impact on their health and well-being. In summary, the students’ narratives seemed to voice the question: ‘is this scheme set up for our benefit or for us to fail’.

In 2009 report ‘Student Aid Meets Social Assistance’ highlights that student financial assistance schemes are governed by the principle of ‘supplementary’, which means that they are supposed to act as a supplement to available resources. Students who access these schemes are expected to work, use their savings or seek family contributions to help with their educational costs. The narratives of the students conveyed that the policies and procedures governing the assistance scheme were inflexible, punitive and far removed from the reality of the life experiences of these students. Students found it difficult to access detailed information about these schemes. This is confirmed by the ACCC Report (2008), which states it is difficult for many students to access these funding sources due to the complexity of the systems in place and the restrictions of many of the programs that are available. In the absence of accessible information, timely advice and support from fund advisors and school counselors, many low income minority students decide to drop out of the study program while others may push themselves beyond the limit till they have a breakdown. This was the experience of the students in this study.

From a critical race theory perspective, financial assistance schemes, such as the one discussed above although commendable in providing options to access educational opportunities for radicalized and minorities learners, are based on neoliberal assumptions that provision of financial assistance and increasing the intake of minority students into post-secondary institutions will lead to an increase in the numbers of these students completing postsecondary study. The findings of this study provide contrary evidence to these assumptions. They highlight that low-income earners students from radicalized and minority’s backgrounds face several structural barriers, which contribute to drop out of postsecondary study programs. These low-income minority students in particular face additional barriers as described above.

Unlike peers from non-minority backgrounds, these students have fewer resources and access to capital—they are unable to access financial or childcare support from networks including extended family, friends, and social grants/assistance. Thus, in addition to pressures of access to capital and support, they often have caregiving responsibilities for extended family members and above all they experience ongoing racism in their educational institutions. Therefore, financial aid schemes are unfair and adversely affect low-income minority students. If such schemes are to achieve the purpose for which they are designed, there must be an element of fairness with greater emphasis directed towards removing structural barriers such as lack of affordable child care and institutionalized racism that many of these students face.

**Discussion and Implications for Social Work**

The findings of this study are based on a small sample of 14 mature aged minority students enrolled in a Human Services Program (includes community development and social work students) at a community college in Western Canada that is known for its diversity in student population. They may not be generalizable to minority students from other programs or contexts. Nevertheless, the findings are significant and consequential. They support previous findings that interrelated extraneous factors, includ-
Social work classes in Canada are becoming increasingly diverse. Razack refers to these as ‘postcolonial spaces where the colonizer and colonized come together for teaching and learning’. Students from privileged backgrounds occupy the same space as indigenous students who have experienced the legacy of colonization and those who have suffered through political wars, genocide, ethnic cleansing and torture. In these multicultural spaces where histories collide and differences are significantly visible in terms of race, culture, and skin color, white students enjoy an unearned privilege while minority students are acutely aware of their marginalized ‘other’ status. Within these spaces interactions among students on issues related to racism, oppression and privilege can arouse strong emotions ranging from discomfort to anger, guilt, disappointment and feelings of inferiority, which can lead to conflicts.

Social work educators have a critical role to play in how they manage these complex discussions while also facilitating student learning [44]. Studies show that instructors may avoid student discussions on these topics because of time constraints and their potential for conflict. Instructors may also avoid these discussions in favor of abstract or general discussions of populations at risk due to their own feelings of ambivalence and discomfort. These discussions are largely from western texts that overemphasize the pathological and dysfunctional aspects of at risk groups, many of which comprise colored minority groups. This approach to teaching about diversity disadvantages both white and minority students because first, it associates race with social problems and second, does not give much attention to the experiences of the white majority. Avoidance on the part of instructors to engage students in discussions on racism can perpetuate students’ levels of discomfort about these topics.

The findings of the current study suggest that multicultural social work education and traditional pedagogical approaches to impart cultural competence have had a limited impact on promoting racial equality and inclusive education, combating white hegemony and cultural racism, which refers to cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and inferiority of people of color. If these issues are left unaddressed white students will lack awareness about privilege and this can act as a barrier to culturally grounded effective practice.

At a macro level, lack of awareness about privilege and racial oppression will reinforce and perpetuate the oppressive practices of social institutions. In the context of teaching pedagogy and practice, continued reliance by instructors on Eurocentric ways for teaching and assessment, failure to contextualize teaching to the lived experiences of minority students and address unequal power relations experienced by them can lead to feelings of disengagement and frustration. Minority students, as suggested by the findings of the current study, may feel silenced and can internalize their perceived inferior status.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a Decolonizing Pedagogy**

Social work educators have proposed CRT as a decolonizing discourse that can help to radicalize contemporary social work education and pedagogy. As discussed earlier, CRT tends to the voice of marginalized students by placing it in the social context. It highlights how dominant colonial discourses are firmly entrenched in the structures of educational institutions and get reflected in educational theory, policy and practice, leading to subordination of certain racial groups. Within these structures minority students may face several challenges—having to acquiesce to a racist structure, being forced to learn material that is not an accurate reflection of their lived experiences and may be of little relevance to their communities. CRT, in keeping with the social work values of social justice aims to uncover the mechanisms and structures that disadvantage people; dismantle these oppressive structures while simultaneously recognizing personal distress and resistance.

Based on the findings of the current study and our own experiences as faculty of color vested with the responsibility of preparing social work students for practice in diverse cultural contexts, we propose three areas for developing a pedagogical framework based on CRT perspectives. These are by no means exhaustive and include:

a) Creating awareness among white students about racial micro aggressions
b) raising consciousness among white students about invisible forms of privilege and its role in sustaining oppressive structures and arrangements within centers of higher learning (and other social organizations); and

c) Activating the agency of minority students by involving them in recognizing racism and developing systematic forms of resistance in the face of socially unjust practices.

The role of the educator/teacher/lecturer/instructor is critical. Being knowledgeable about postcolonial and critical race
theories and having an understanding of marginalized group cultures is not enough\(^{(39)}\). The instructor must provide the context where the histories, cultures and experiences of diverse student bodies can be critically discussed and where inequitable power relations are interrogated. Power dynamics, conflicts and anxieties may arise when students examine and confront their own racist and privileged perspectives and these may reproduce experiences of oppression and discrimination for some. The instructor must show awareness, sensitivity and comfort with group dynamics in guiding students both individually and collectively to process their thoughts and feelings. The instructor must also be critically reflective as they may be confronted with their own biases and prejudices about student groups.

As with other critical theories, the application of CRT for classroom teaching and learning is still in the early stages of development. While it can be demanding and challenging for instructors it can provide a transformative learning experience for students. Strategies that can alleviate some of the challenges instructors may face include co-teaching, inviting guest lecturers, being explicit about not having all of the answers and discussing expectations of students at the beginning of the course. Recommending texts written by minority authors is another useful strategy since these may reflect more accurately the experiences of minorities and include teaching and learning strategies that are contextualized to and incorporate minority life experiences.

Involving minority practitioners, cultural brokers, and ex-students in the development of course curricula that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of minority populations can help to make the course curriculum culturally relevant. Minority students can benefit from having mentors from minority backgrounds who can serve as role models and advisors to help them navigate the often hostile terrain within institutions\(^{(39)}\). At an institutional level dismantling oppressive practices and challenging despotic structures can be challenging. But a beginning can be made by recruiting educators and administrators whose education has incorporated studies on racism and antiracist perspectives. Likeminded educators and administrators can work towards instituting policies that support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority students and ensure that they feel safe in classrooms to bring up issues related to racism and discrimination and apply for affirmative action.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has presented the findings of a study that examined the experiences, challenges and barriers faced by low-income mature aged minority students enrolled in a human services program at a Canadian post-secondary educational institution. These barriers pose a risk to these students completing their postsecondary study. Educational institutions and decision making bodies seek to increase the number of these students completing postsecondary study through various financial assistance and loan schemes. This paper has argued that these measures will be successful in achieving their goals only if they are complemented by structural changes at the institutional level and by creating transformative learning environments where every student feels heard, valued, supported and empowered. The paper proposes that postcolonial pedagogies based on critical race theory can play a valuable role in creating transformative learning environments and bringing about changes at the institutional level.

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